

To Your Red Wedding Go

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To Your Red Wedding Go

by [WhiteMiserable](#)

Summary

Will Graham is a prince in name alone, a bastard omega son of the King, with no prospects and no future.

When his father dies, he sees it for the opportunity it is- a chance to escape beyond the reach of his royal half-siblings. The arrival of emissaries from a foreign warlord changes nothing, even if one of them is a strange, oddly intriguing alpha. Will's plans can still move forward without issue.

Or so he thinks.

Notes

Writing this fic has been quite the journey. Thank you to everyone in the Will's Graham's Ass server who listened to me bitching about it, and who gave me the encouragement to keep on pushing forward. Love you all!

The original prompt was: "Prince omega Will stuck in an arranged marriage. His groom ends up being an unexpected dream."

...obviously I veered away from the original intentions a bit.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The King dies shortly after Will's twenty-first birthday.

Illness, claims the royal physician. Poison, according to rumor. Will knows it's the latter, sees it in the Queen's obvious desire to place her eldest son on the throne, in the way the other princes and princesses smile behind their mourning veils, in the way all of their whispers stop when Will enters a room.

For Will Graham, too, is a prince, if in little more than name.

His father may have been King, but his mother, a poor omega farmer, was by no means noble, and there was no marriage or mating bond between them. And while his father did take Will in upon the death of his mother and acknowledge his lineage, it had been a blatant political gesture, a way to endear the King to the peasant masses, not an impulse born of affection for a bastard son. Will has no power, no status, no official place in the line for the throne. There had never been a seat for him at his father's high table in the great hall, no chair on the dais during jousting tournaments, no threads of his name woven into the family tapestries that decorate the castle's winding corridors. He was not offered his father's royal name, and can count on one hand the times he had spent alone with the alpha. The omega Queen openly despises him, and his royal half-siblings take that displeasure ever further, childish cruelty growing into adult hatred. Not even the benefits of Will's womb, discussed briefly as they had been when he'd undergone his first heat in his eighteenth year, had made him worthy of notice. No one would want to marry a bastard son.

So Will Graham is a prince, and a very lonely one, and this is how he expects the rest of his life to go. Lurking by the edge, watching and listening, dreaming of the wide world beyond the city walls and the freedom that must wait out there. Planning for his moment to escape.

And here, now, it has arrived.

He cannot simply vanish into the forest, he knows, no matter how much he might like to, for while he might be the unwanted bastard child, he is also a very convenient scapegoat, one who has some access to the royal secrets without any of the protections of the nobility. If he does not tread carefully, all suspicion for the King's death will doubtless fall upon his shoulders, and he has seen the way those kind of accusations can lead a person up to the hangman's noose. There is no point in taking control of his life if it only ends up with him swinging in a month or two.

No, he'll need a distraction. And he knows just the one.

With the King dead and the heir to the throne ready to ascend it, there are a number of formal gatherings which foreign royalty, nobility, business interests, and allies will be expected to attend. Half somber ceremony, half glittering banquet, all under the banner of celebrating Kings both old and new, all an occasion for the rich and powerful to show off their finest gowns and jewels and solidify their own ties to the royal family. And while Will might be the unwanted bastard child, he, too, is expected to make an appearance, to allow the castle's guests an opportunity to coo over how selfless the royals are for continuing to care for their father's mistake.

Normally, this would bother him. Now, though, he sees just how much quiet chaos such a large group of visitors arriving all at once will bring to the city. Now, he recognizes how, if he is cautious, he will be able to lay the intrigue of his disappearance at the feet of some rich, miserable stranger, and give himself the freedom to escape into the night.

So he watches as invitations ride out on horseback and return with eager acceptance, and watches as the castle is polished until the stonework gleams, and watches as the city dresses up in flower garlands and ribbons, and watches as his half-siblings and the Queen make themselves beautiful in their mourning finery, and he does not complain when he is ordered to do the same. It wouldn't do for the bastard prince to show up looking like a commoner and embarrassing the true royals, after all. His best breeches and omega half-gown are not so elegantly embroidered, and he has no jewelry to make himself sparkle, but he neatens his hair, touches his cheeks with bright powder, dabs perfume onto his throat, tucks a sprig of dark flowers behind his ear. The handsome young omega who looks back at him in his small mirror is not the everyday Will Graham who lurks around the kennels and avoids interacting with other humans, and tonight, that serves his purposes well.

Though there is a hint of that everyday Will Graham in the knife hidden within the folds of his belt.

Before the arrival of the first guests, he makes his way down to the great hall to meet with his half-siblings and their mother. They are gathered before the high table, where their seats await but Will's does not, and he lingers on the outskirts, waiting to be acknowledged. The conversation doesn't pause, but he sees glances cast his way, though he refuses to meet them.

Finally, one of his alpha half-sisters turns to peer at him. "I almost didn't recognize you, little bastard," she says. "It seems a cur in fine clothes can be made to look human after all."

"Are you trying to impress us?" asks a half-brother, a beta who is almost exactly Will's age. "Or have you decided you want to try your hand at seducing a rich alpha for the night? It has been a while since I last heard about you spreading your legs for the stablehands."

"Don't be crude, darling," says the Queen. Her voice is too amused to be reprimanding.

Will fights down his instinctive bristling ire. Their assumptions will work to his favor, he reminds himself, even if this is not quite what he'd planned. But if they think him whorish enough to beg one of their guests for a knot, they will be more likely to believe him to be stolen away, whether willingly or by force. He needs only suffer through their taunting for a night. By this time tomorrow, he will be well gone.

"Have we done you wrong, not finding you a suitable alpha? No doubt you would be sweeter with a bite mark on your neck and a few pups to feed," says another half-sister. "Lord Verger's son lost his spouse a short while ago, you know. Some dreadful accident. Perhaps he'll be looking for an omega to keep his bed warm."

"House Verger always has been loyal to the throne," says the oldest half-brother, the soon-to-be-King. "They sent some of their choicest hogs for tonight's feast." He smiles, a wide dimpling smile that makes Will freeze where he stands, and adds, "I think it is high time we give them a hog in return."

This is not a new threat. Will has heard it before, many, many times. Now, though, it gives him pause. House Verger is notorious for its treatment of any omegas unlucky enough to cross paths with its members, and it is well known that the death of Mason's spouse was no accident, other than that perhaps they had died sooner than Mason would have liked, and Will's half-siblings have always enjoyed holding that potential violence over his head. Under the steady rule of the old King, who may have had no interest in his bastard son but made no secret of his distaste for the Vergers, Will had found some unspoken comfort in the knowledge that his forced bonding into House Verger was unlikely. Now, that small protection is gone. Now, he is at the mercy of people who despise him, and who have proven themselves to be willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want, if the death of the King is any indication.

Will draws in a deep breath and lets it out slowly. He does not respond. He, too, is willing to do what is necessary to survive.

Fortunately, there is little time left before their guests arrive, and the true royals are more interested in preparing themselves to be seen than they are in tormenting Will. Will himself is content to fade into the shadows. One night, he reminds himself. One night.

The great hall fills slowly, noble by noble, small entourage by small entourage, each dressed in clothing that is obviously intended to convey both acceptably sincere mourning and flamboyant peacocking of wealth. They make their way to the high table to greet the royals, exchanging condolences and simpering pleasantries, then turn towards their seats at the lower tables. Will recognizes some of them- a beta lord from the next kingdom here, an omega merchant from a distant town there, a lauded alpha warrior further back- but none of them draw his attention for more than the moment it takes to remember their names and faces. None of them would lift so much as a finger in his aid, and as such, they aren't worth his time.

A flurry of motion catches his eye, and he glances at the closest end of one of the nearer tables. His stomach drops. Sitting upon the bench is Mason Verger, one hand raised in a jaunty wave in Will's direction, mouth curled in a wide rictus smile. He is seated beside an older, even more richly dressed alpha, the lord and patriarch of House Verger, and beyond that sits a beta that Will recognizes as Mason's sister, Margot, whose gaze is fixed upon the surface of the table. For a moment, Will sees a future where he, too, is seated at that table, perhaps pregnant, marked by Mason's teeth, suffering from the same bruising half-hidden by the hems of Margot's clothing. He shivers and wrenches his gaze away.

The noise rises within the hall as it fills, the sound of voices mingling with feet upon the stone floor and the scraping of benches and tables, all of it echoing along the vaulted ceiling. Will folds his hands behind himself, a proper stance that doubles as a veil for the way he digs his nails into his palms to stop himself from turning and fleeing the cacophony. He wishes that he couldn't feel Mason's lascivious gaze burning into him.

Then three figures step through the open doors, and slowly, all noise stops as everyone turns to stare at the newcomers. They are garbed head to toe in leathers that shine red under the torchlights, but not the soft hunting leathers of the nobility, or the rough jerkins of foot soldiers. No, these leathers are strange and segmented, animalistic, unlike anything to be

found within the Southern kingdoms, and the masks upon the newcomers' faces, formed into the shape of deer with small antlers, only add to the strangeness. And that can only mean one thing.

Northerners. Those who live in the sprawling lands to the North, where winter reigns for half the year and the wolves are said to be lean and ever hungry, ruled by an alpha whose face and name no Southerner has lived to share. There are rumors that this alpha has riches beyond imagination, and that his castle is surrounded by the heads of enemies mounted on pikes, and that he worships dread gods that demand blood sacrifice. The Stag, people call him in hushed, furtive whispers. A beast with a crown of bloodstained antlers.

The three Northerners stride towards the high table, and the air grows tense with wariness. Hands go to weapons, but the Northerners don't so much as pause until they stand right where all other guests have stood to deliver their greetings to the royals. There, the three of them remove their masks, revealing an alpha, a beta, and an omega, all high-cheeked and stern.

"What is the meaning of this?" the King-to-be asks, his voice wavering slightly.

The omega meets his gaze. "We are here on behalf of the Stag," she says, her voice sharp and thickly accented. "He wishes to express his condolences for the loss of your father, and is apologetic that he is not able to attend tonight's feast."

The King-to-be flinches, an almost-panicked glance at his mother, then squares his shoulders and sits taller. "How unfortunate. I fear that we didn't prepare any seating for you, as there was no response to his invitation, but his sentiments are well appreciated."

"Invitation?" asks the alpha, and smiles, tight, subtle. "The Stag did not receive one." His eyes leave the King-to-be, only for a moment, to cast around the hall, and Will, unprepared, finds himself meeting them. In the light of the torches, they glow vibrant red.

"It must have been lost along the way," the King-to-be says tightly.

"Of course," says the alpha. "Never mind the flaws in your seating plans. We will sit where we find space. Congratulations on your ascension to the throne."

Before the King-to-be or any of the royals can speak again, the three Northerners turn and move towards empty seats at the tables. They do not go together, but spread out widely, each taking a spot far from their fellows. The alpha, to Will's shock, walks straight towards him and his seat at the very end of the table closest to one wall. It is out of the way, lacking any real contact with the dais and those sitting upon it, certainly not where any well-to-do lord or lady would choose to be, and yet the alpha sits directly across from Will, in a space that opens wide once the others upon the bench realize his intentions and shuffle unsubtly away. Will fixes his gaze on the alpha's sharp cheekbones and digs his nails into the fabric of his breeches and does not acknowledge that unwavering stare.

The silence drags for a minute, two, and then another group of guests steps through the doors of the great hall, and conversation begins again amongst those already seated, slow and cautious. Will glances around the room, avoiding the eyes of the alpha across from him. The

other two Northerners have also created small pockets of empty space around them where they have sat. A faint thread of fear seasons the air beneath all the sweat and perfumes.

“You are Prince Will, are you not?” the Northern alpha asks after a moment.

Will does not sigh, but only barely. “I am not a true prince,” he says, tone stiff and formal.

The alpha smiles, slightly wider now, though still without parting his lips. “I will take that as a yes. I am Hannibal Lecter, an advisor of the Stag.” He holds out one hand across the tabletop.

Will looks at it and does not reach out in turn. “You know my name, and doubtless my heritage. I don’t know what else you or your lord could want with me.”

“Perhaps I find you interesting.”

“I doubt that very much,” Will says. He doesn’t need to glance towards his side to know that the guests seated closest to them are listening to every word.

“Then perhaps the Stag does,” Hannibal says, withdrawing his hand. “He has followed what little news of you has made its way up into our lands, your grace, and expressed his desire to know my opinion of you firsthand. Surely you will not begrudge me the opportunity to observe you here.”

Will scoffs. “Observe me? How uncouth. You sound like some common pervert, hunting for a body to warm his nest.” One of their highly conspicuous eavesdroppers stifles a shocked gasp. He ignores them in favor of finally meeting Hannibal’s eyes, glittering red in the torchlight. “Should I take all the dark rumors about your people as truth, then?”

“You seem to have already decided on your answer.”

“Then it’s clear you know nothing about me at all, and I see no reason why that should change.” Will looks away from those eyes. “Your lord will only be disappointed.”

“I find that unlikely,” Hannibal says, and Will hears the smile plain in his voice.

Fortunately, the King-to-be chooses this moment to rise and clear his throat, and the hall falls into an anticipatory hush. Will does not listen to a single one of his half-brother’s words. He has heard them often enough over the years, slick and sweet-faced and self-congratulatory. He keeps his eyes lowered, not subservient but just enough to avoid the eyes of both Hannibal and Mason, and allows himself to sink into the river of his own thoughts. One night, he thinks. One night.

A booted foot presses along the side of his own beneath the table.

He pauses.

Then he raises his gaze, ever so slightly, to examine the alpha sitting across from him without meeting his eyes. Hannibal Lecter. Advisor to the Stag. Handsome, in an unusual sort of way. Strong, if the shape of his leathers is any indication. Interested in Will. That last might leave

Will cautiously curious on a normal night, but now, he sees the opportunity in it. Surely it would be easy to convince this room full of jewel-covered strangers that a Northerner so intent on speaking to him would have a hand in his sudden disappearance.

And it's not as though Will has had any particularly pleasurable affairs recently, so he might as well get a good knot in the meantime.

The King-to-be's speech concludes, and the assembled nobility applauds with far more enthusiasm than it is worth. Then comes the feast itself, trays and platters and pitchers of food and drink brought out by servants and set out along the tables, an array of meats and sauces, vegetables and fruits, fishes and sweets, wines pooling deep dark red. Those set between Will and Hannibal remain untouched by their neighbors, as if the dishes are a small feast intended for just the two of them. Will allows himself a chuckle at the ridiculousness of it all as he begins to fill his plate.

"You know," Hannibal says as he lets a beta servant pour wine into his goblet, "there are rumors about you, too, your grace." Will says nothing, and the alpha continues, "That you are being courted by the young Lord Verger, for one."

Now Will laughs, an inelegant snort that would have drawn irate looks from his half-siblings had they been within hearing distance. "A rumor started by House Verger, I expect. If you want my advice, sir, I would suggest ignoring anything that leaves their mouths. Their pigs give better conversation."

Hannibal's mouth quirks upwards again. "I will keep that in mind. Shall I assume that you are still unwed, then? Or are you betrothed to some distant King, too far away to venture here tonight?"

"If you mean to mock me, you'll have to try harder than that," Will says, rolling his eyes. He tears off a piece of bread and smears sweet cream and tart jam across it. "Is that what your Stag wants from me? An omega groom?" He eyes Hannibal as he takes a bite, chews thoughtfully, swallows. "Or perhaps you are more self-serving than you pretend to be, and that is your own desire."

"You ask quite a few questions for one so unwilling to answer any," Hannibal replies.

"You are the one who came over here to speak to me," Will reminds him. "I owe you nothing."

And again, Hannibal smiles, with lips that seem unused to doing so with such frequency. "I suppose not."

The feast carries on, waves of noise and motion around them, and their conversation carries on as well. Will finds his refusals to give clear answers becoming more and more playful with every attempt, and with every smile he receives in return, he becomes more and more certain that Hannibal is attracted to him. How very convenient, he thinks. He does not pull away from the press of Hannibal's foot against his own beneath the table, and allows himself to lean forward, to tilt his head and bare his neck ever so slightly, to meet red eyes in brief

shocking bursts. Maybe it is too much, too obvious, but it's fun, and after all, he only intends to be here for a few hours more.

And so, as the food is cleared away, the feasting winding down towards the slow, meandering end to the evening, Will decides to enact the next stage of his plan. "Tell me, sir, whether it is you who desires me, or your Stag." He allows a servant to refill his goblet one last time, and meets Hannibal's eyes, and lifts his foot slightly to run the toe of his soft fancy slipper up along the knob of Hannibal's ankle.

"Does it matter?" Hannibal asks. Despite his polite expression, the way he hooks his ankle around Will's own, trapping him in place, is nigh violent in its sharpness.

"Well," Will says after taking a sip of wine, "I only see one alpha sitting before me right now-" with a subtle relaxation of his shoulders, he lets the front of his half-gown gape slightly open, revealing the inner curve of his chest- "and I fear I'm not willing to wait."

Hannibal's gaze dips downwards, unabashed, before he inclines his head in acknowledgement. Instead of responding to the question, though, he sets his own goblet down, unhooks Will's ankle, and stands in one elegant motion. "If I might have a moment, your grace." He turns away without waiting for Will's response and moves towards the high table once again.

Will scowls at his retreating back. Has he miscalculated, misread Hannibal's intentions? But no, he recognizes alphan arousal, even if it is rarely directed his way, and Hannibal had been clear enough in his touches and glances and words. And yet-

"What?" says the King-to-be, loud enough to echo along the vaulted ceilings and shock the entire hall into silence.

Straight-backed and stoic, Hannibal says, "The Stag has sent me with an offer for the hand of your brother. I would be happy to discuss the terms with you once the festivities have ended."

Brother? Will's gaze flits between the royals seated upon the dais, taking in the expressions of his half-brothers. He sees shock, horror, distaste, all of it twisting their smug faces into ugly masks, and he wonders what the Stag hopes to gain by forcing one of them away to the North. They are all alphas and betas, too, none of them able to bear the pups that a ruler like the Stag no doubt wants. Surely there must be better options.

"Perhaps things are different in your lands," the King-to-be says, his fingers digging so tight against the table that Will can see his white knuckles, "but in this Kingdom, it is considered quite unusual to ask for a royal hand in marriage without the asker having the decency to present himself in person."

"For that, I should apologize in the Stag's stead," Hannibal replies, and does not do so. "He requested that I spend some time with his intended, to see if his desires are well-founded, and after our meal together, I have found that his intended far exceeds all expectations. The Stag will be quite pleased."

The truth falls into place right as Hannibal turns to look at Will, and Will freezes, stunned, as everyone else in the hall stares at him as well. The words ring through his mind over and over. The Stag. His desires. His intended. Will looks from Hannibal's face up to those of his half-siblings and their mother, and he sees the moment that they recognize the opportunity they have been offered. His stomach sinks. Sending him away to the North, to a distant land where they will never again need to deal with him, to the arms of a strange lord surrounded by dark rumor- it must seem a dream.

"As an act of good faith between our people, I will accept this request for Prince Will's hand, despite its strange nature," says the King-to-be. He is clearly fighting not to laugh, his cheeks twitching around his sweetly polite smile. "He will be an integral part of the Stag's household, I'm sure."

Bruised and battered and full of pups, Will hears beneath the spoken words. He bristles, not bothering to hide his glare, but does not stand or shout or fight back. He will not be here after tonight, he reminds himself once more. He will not be around to be forced away to a stranger's nest and a subservient future. He glances at Hannibal, and sees the satisfied smirk on his lips, and feels that spark of attraction deep within him catch flame into something more malicious. If this alpha thinks that he can toy with Will without repercussion, he is going to have a very rude awakening.

Rather than wait for the hall to clear of other guests, as Hannibal had suggested, the King-to-be insists on haggling for Will's hand right then and there. Will's ire burns hotter with every embarrassing second as he listens to both alphas speak of him as if he were nothing more than a decent piece of meat. He digs his nails so deep into his palms that he feels them break the skin.

When finally his fate has been settled, and the King-to-be commands the servants to bring one last round of wine for the happy occasion of his half-brother's engagement, Hannibal returns to his seat. Will glowers at him. "You are just like all other alphas. A common pervert after all."

"I should hardly think so," Hannibal says mildly. "I have done nothing but what I was asked."

"What would your lord think, knowing that you have not only been speaking to me tonight, but flirting as well? I'm not a fool, sir. I know what an alpha looks like when he wants to bury himself between my legs." Will raises a brow. "Or is testing out the prowess of the Stag's husband-to-be part of your orders as well?"

"How crude you think me." But Hannibal is still smiling, that subtle quirk of his lips. "I told you before that I find you interesting, your grace. My desires are my own, and no one but myself controls them."

"And your lord would approve?" Will asks. "I am to be married to him now, after all. Surely he would prefer an untouched omega."

Hannibal's smile widens. "Are you an untouched omega?"

Despite himself, Will laughs, and in that moment, he decides that his original plan will still work. Now, the satisfaction of sexual pleasure and the promise of freedom will have an extra seasoning of retribution on top of it all, and without any of the bitterness of guilt for whatever accusations Hannibal might find thrown at him in the morning. Let their one night together bring him nothing but regret. Will intends to enjoy every second of it.

So he leans forward, eyes narrowed, and says, “No, I am not. Shall I show you my nest to prove it?”

Those sitting at the table beside them go silent, shocked and waiting. Will does not look away from Hannibal. Beneath the tabletop, he hooks his ankle around Hannibal’s again, hard enough to bruise.

“You are a wonder, your grace,” Hannibal says after a moment. He is not smiling now, but there is something in his expression, some heated, dark, strange thing hiding behind the skin of his face, that makes Will burn deep in his core. “A wild, unpredictable creature. The Stag will be most pleased.”

“Is that a no?” Will asks, even though he knows the answer.

Hannibal shakes his head, slow and ponderous, and says, “No, it is not. Show me your nest, your grace.”

“Will.”

“Show me your nest, Will.”

Will does. The great hall is emptying now, the guests retreating to their rooms and lodgings for the night, readying themselves for a day of meetings and mourning-clad festivities with the royals, but the unexpected proposal from a Northerner has captured their attention, and Will feels the weight of many stares upon his back as he leads Hannibal out into the halls. It leaves him uncomfortable and satisfied all at once. The rumors will flow freely come morning.

Upon reaching Will’s rooms, he and Hannibal spend perhaps half a minute exchanging the sort of stilted pleasantries about decor and cleanliness that is expected of the nobility, but then Will rests his hands lightly against Hannibal’s chest and proceeds to shove him backwards into the nest, and common courtesies are cast aside for far more pleasurable pursuits. Will’s half-gown falls away easily, and his styled curls grow messy and wild under Hannibal’s hands. Removing Hannibal’s leathers is a more tedious process, but Will follows the lines of bared skin with his teeth and tongue, memorizing every hook and catch and button as he goes. Hannibal raises his brows as he uncovers Will’s hidden knife, and Will smiles and allows it to nick at his finger, and smears his own blood against the blankets in his nest, along the planes of Hannibal’s chest.

They become acquainted with each other’s bodies there in Will’s nest, the sticky slide of sweaty skin, the taste of desire shared between their lips. Hannibal drinks deeply of the slick dripping from Will’s hole, and Will learns the weight and heft of Hannibal’s thick cock on his tongue. It’s a shame that they could not have met some other way, Will thinks as he straddles

Hannibal's hips and guides that cock into himself. He might have welcomed such an eager bedmate without all these obstacles between them. But none of that matters now, so he rolls his hips down, digs his nails into Hannibal's chest, and loses himself to sensation. He leans down to kiss the breath from Hannibal's lips, and then again, and again, until he can no longer tell the difference between the taste of Hannibal's mouth and his own. And when Hannibal comes inside him, knot swelling and stretching Will's inner walls wide, and Will claws so deeply into Hannibal's back that he feels the skin break as he comes as well, he allows Hannibal to hold him close, surrounds himself with the combined satisfaction of their afterglow, and closes his eyes.

Before the sun rises, Will crawls out of his nest, silent, stealthy careful not to wake the alpha still sleeping amongst the blankets. He considers for only a moment before dressing in Hannibal's discarded leathers. They do not fit perfectly, too slim in the hips and seat, too narrow in the shoulders, but they are comfortable against his skin, and their strange red color appears almost black in the moonlight, perfect for what he needs. He gathers the satchel he'd packed the day before and pulls on his hardest boots before making his way to the door on quiet feet.

He hesitates in the doorway, staring out into the dark hallway, and wonders what might have happened had he met Hannibal in gentler times. Arguments, no doubt, and misunderstandings, and irritation, but perhaps the potential for something more. He can't resist. He looks back over his shoulder, and finds himself meeting alert red eyes watching him from the mussed blankets of his nest. The silent eye contact stretches between them, knife-sharp, and then Will smiles, unapologetic, and Hannibal smiles back.

Neither of them says a word. Hannibal closes his eyes and relaxes back into the nest, and Will steps into the hallway and closes the door behind himself. He walks down the dark hall, and out into the night, and does not turn around again.

The next days blur into a week, and then a few more, as Will wanders well away from the main roads, out of sight of any travelers who might recognize his face. He camps deep in the forests each night, his fire burning low, and hunts and gathers for his own meals as much as he can. Only when his essential supplies are at their very lowest, unable to be collected from the wild, does he venture into the smallest of rural villages, and even then, he keeps his head low and does not linger. He keeps his ears open for news every time. At first, he hears rumors of his own disappearance and the cloud of suspicion that fell upon one Northern alpha, but those fade in frequency and urgency the further away he gets from the city. He hears mention of the escape of the Northerners before any royal judgement could be had, and finds himself surprisingly pleased by the idea. If that rumor is true, then Hannibal is also free and returning to his home. Let the King-to-be wallow in that one more small failure.

But after several weeks of travel, with only the vague idea of the sea in mind for a destination, Will begins to feel horribly nauseous. He assumes that must have misjudged some foraged mushrooms, and resigns himself to a few days of discomfort. And yet the nausea ebbs and crests and does not go away. Sometimes the simple scent of cooking meat is enough to make him gag. He changes his habits, fishing more than hunting, chewing on bark and mint, massaging his aching abdomen while he rests, and still it does not ease.

And then his chest begins to ache, and when he finds a decent stream to wash off days of travel grime and sweat, he sees that his nipples have darkened and swollen. His hips start to hurt, no matter how much he stretches his muscles. He finds himself needing to empty his bladder more and more frequently, and overheating even on days where he spends most of the sunlight hours reclining in the shade, and breathing heavy while merely sitting tending to his campfire.

He is not a fool. He can clearly recall the stretch of Hannibal's knot within him, and the warmth of thick seed dripping down his thighs once they had separated. He simply does not want to assume. It's entirely possible that he is coming down with some sort of illness, albeit one with some very peculiar symptoms. So he heads to the nearest village as soon as he can, and makes his way to the local midwife.

That midwife takes only the briefest look at him once he disrobes before her and explains the most basic facts of his sickness. "You're pregnant, darling," she says, resting her hands upon the heavy swell of her own abdomen. "With more than one pup, too, if you're right about your timings." She pauses. "Is this a happy occasion? I can make you a tea to empty your womb, otherwise."

Will touches his stomach, still mostly flat, but with a slight bloat that he is only now noticing. The sort of lonely, rough, wandering life he'd intended for himself is no place for pups. They would need safety, stability, companionship. And could he truly provide for a young family, alone in the wild? No, they would tie him down again, so soon after he has claimed his own freedom. He should accept the tea, he knows, and carry on his way.

But.

He has always wanted a pup or two of his own, to nurture and love the way he has so rarely experienced for himself. And he thinks of Hannibal, with those red eyes and sharp features, and wonders how their bloodlines might mix. Would the pups have Will's dark curls, or Hannibal's lighter strands? What would their noses look like? Their lips? Their chins? Would they cry through the night, or would they rest easy in the bower Will might build for them? Would they call him father, or papa, or something else entirely?

"Happy," he says, a mere whisper. "It's a happy one."

He does not stop traveling, keeping his ears open and his eyes watchful, but now he settles on his destination- the coastline and the fishing villages that line it. He had learned the basics of sailing during his royal education, a hands-on experience that he had enjoyed despite his half-siblings' brutal bullying, and he knows himself to be a decent fisherman. The sea air will be good for his pups, too. It is surprisingly easy to imagine a future as a father out there, eking out a living on the waves, returning home to a house full of smiling pups eager to see him.

He does not imagine a mate. Sometimes, he thinks of the unknown betrothed he'd left behind, that strange Stag from the North, but those musings never linger. Sometimes, he thinks of Hannibal, the strength of his hands and the thickness of his cock, but those fantasies visit him only under cover of the night, in the privacy of his bedroll, and never stay beyond the dawn. Neither of them are worthy of his future.

The journey is slow-going, for he still keeps well away from the main roads, and his hips ache and his skin burns and he is tired all the time, so he can only go so far in one day. His emotions become unpredictable, even to himself. His abdomen swells, slowly at first, then faster, and his chest swells along with it. He stops in at villages more frequently to visit whatever midwives and physicians he can find, but moves on quickly when they seem too curious.

The sun rises and sinks, rises and sinks, for days, for weeks, and then, finally, he smells the saltwater scent of the ocean. He makes camp even earlier than usual that evening, groaning as he maneuvers himself down onto his bedroll, the motion made much more complicated by the now-heavy weight of his stomach. Before he can settle in, though, he feels a sudden motion inside his womb, a slight sharp discomfort. A kick. He presses gently upon that area with his fingers, and after a moment, he feels it again. With a quiet sigh, he closes his eyes and thanks Hannibal, wherever he is now, for this unexpected gift.

When he arrives in the nearest village late the next day, fortune favors him, for he only has to speak to a few locals before being pointed in the direction of a young beta widow with a pup of her own and a spare room that she is more than willing to give him in return for help around the house and a bit of coin towards meals. Her open friendliness and affection are surprising after so long spent alone, but Will appreciates them all the same. Her familiarity with the trials of pregnancy is even more welcome.

And here is where he stays for months, as his stomach grows bigger yet. He learns the habits of the fisherpeople and makes a small salary for helping to clean their catches down by the docks. He examines the empty land at the edge of the village, trying to imagine the house he could build there. He befriends the local strays that roam the streets. He struggles with his fatigue and his aching body and his sore, swollen chest. His pups shift restlessly inside him as time winds closer and closer to their due date.

But Will's luck has never been that good, and his peace cannot last. He begins to notice an unfamiliar face around the village, an alpha with long, fiery red curls. At first, he thinks nothing of it- on the seaside, the occasional traveler is an idle curiosity at best- but then he realizes that he has been seeing her when he is down at the docks, and when he wanders the edge of the wild, and when he ventures into the shops for grain and wax and honey, and with a sinking dread he understands that this is no coincidence.

After all this time, he has been found.

His stalker's lack of physical aggression makes him curious, though. She doesn't strike him as the sort of violent hunter the royal family might usually employ, so it seems far more likely that she is some sort of opportunistic free agent. And if that is the case, perhaps Will can still salvage this.

Early one morning, when the nighttime shadows stretch so long across the ground that it can hardly be considered dawn, he sets out for a slow, meandering walk beyond the borders of the village proper. It's not out of the usual for him, on the nights where he cannot sleep, and so he does not attract any suspicion from the other early risers he passes. His stalker follows, of course. He gives no indication of noticing her presence.

Then they pass behind an old abandoned farmstead, a good distance from the sleepy village square, and he turns abruptly on his heel, advancing towards her and forcing her back towards the wall of the ruined building. "What kind of bounty have they put on my head?"

The alpha gives him a long look, and he sees the mental debate play out across her face, the consideration of whether to be bullheaded or sweet, to lie or tell the truth, before her lips twitch upwards into a smile, slick and sly. "Are you hoping for a cut, if you were to submit yourself quietly? I'm afraid I already sent a messenger back to your family weeks ago. They were ever so concerned about you, your grace." Then her gaze lowers to his protruding stomach. "I know they must have been pleased to hear about your condition."

Will grits his teeth. "I'm sure they were. How did you find me here?" He thinks back on his journey, reexamining every small detail, pouring over every conversation. Had someone recognized him after all? Had he been seen during his initial escape?

"Do not strain yourself," the alpha says with a laugh. "I'm good at finding what I want to find, Prince Will, and you must realize that you cut a unique figure. Asking the right questions can light a spark of recognition in even those with the poorest of memories. And as for the reward being offered..." She looks him over again, and he does not need to meet her eyes to know that she is unimpressed by what she sees. "Well, let us simply say that the coin is far less important than the reputation to be gained."

An unusual sort of bounty hunter, then. Will eyes her, focusing on the folds of her clothing where a weapon might be concealed, but sees no tell-tale bulges or odd creases. She is not afraid of him, he realizes. A heavily pregnant omega, unmated and alone, unarmed, far from the place where he was raised- she looks at him and sees no threat, nothing to fear.

More fool her.

So Will makes a show of scowling and looking away, and uses the motion to briefly cast his gaze along the ground and the rotting lumber and barrels nearby, searching for anything he will be able to grasp without needing to bend over. There, wedged between two barrels- a bit of fired clay, some old piece of shattered pottery. "You don't sound particularly loyal to the royal family," he says, resting one hand upon his stomach and shifting towards the barrels with a grimace, as if attempting to ease the weight of the pups within him.

She scoffs. "Hardly. Loyalty invites nothing but problems, as I'm sure you well know."

"If I were to leave again," he says, leaning back against the barrels and wrapping his fingers around the pottery shard, "I suppose I should expect you to continue dogging my heels."

"I suppose so." Then she pauses. "You are being far calmer about this than I had expected. Has pregnancy softened your notoriously rough edges? Or-"

Will sees the moment that she realizes what he is going to do, the way her shoulders tense and her chest expands, and he does not hesitate. His first strike hits her above the ear, the pottery shard carving into the soft flesh there and digging in until it meets bone. Blood sprays out over his hand. She lets out a wheezing cry of pain. At this distance to the village center, it is unlikely that any will hear her, but he doesn't allow her to make the sound again. His

second strike catches her directly in the face. Her nose breaks with a sharp cracking noise, and something in her mouth gives way. When he hits her a third time, she stumbles backwards and falls to the ground. Will drops the bloody shard and stomps down on her face with his foot instead, and then again, and again, and again, until her head is soft and pulpy beneath his heel, and her body stops twitching with each impact. Only then does he step away, heart racing, breath coming heavily through his mouth, and mind perfectly calm.

The corpse is a mess, and so is Will. Were he less swollen with pregnancy, he would spare not a second before dragging the body out into the woods for the local scavengers to feast upon, but as round as he is now, there is no chance that he will be able to lean down, grab, and move such a dead weight without harming himself and his pups. The body is mostly concealed by the abandoned building and the encroaching wild around it, yet he knows better than to assume that it will stay that way. He is not the only person who tends to wander out here. Sooner or later, the body will be found, and questions will be raised, and he has no intentions of being present to hear them. He allows himself to grieve his fisherman dreams for a long, quiet moment.

Then he carries onwards, for if he cannot move the body, he will need to move himself.

His breeches and shirt are covered in blood, deep red smears that stand out against the browns and creams of the fabric. There will be no hiding them, not with the way his swollen stomach and chest press them outwards, and no cleaning them, not without rousing suspicion of the locals. So with one final look at the bounty hunter's mess of a skull, still surrounded by her cloud of messy red curls, Will heads back to the house where he has been living so comfortably. It is still early enough that he passes few people along the way. None try to stop him. His landlady and her pup have not yet risen for the day, and he hastily strips off his ruined clothing and dresses in an older, worn-out set that barely fits over his current figure. He stuffs the bloody clothes into the bottom of his traveling satchel, gathers together his few meager belongings, then hesitates as he looks around the room that has become his own over these past few months. He will miss it, this peace and quiet, however temporary it turned out. And then he leaves, silently, without goodbye. No one calls out to him on the morning-dark streets, but he feels the weight of many a stare upon his back.

He has no plan now. Being discovered has always been a lingering possibility in his mind, but after so many months of freedom, he has allowed himself to relax, to stop jumping at shadows, to ease his constant need for advanced preparations and ever-watchfulness, and that unwarranted sense of comfort has come back to bite him. His pups are due in somewhere around a month, assuming they do not want to come out early. The very idea of giving birth alone, out in the dirt and the underbrush, makes him shiver. So many things could go wrong. But if the bounty hunter spoke true, and his half-siblings are aware of his survival and his relative location, attempting to settle down in another nearby village will doubtless invite equal, if not greater, misfortune.

He does not have long to weigh his options, though. Later that same day, as the sun begins to creep towards the horizon, he chooses a copse of trees to use as a campsite and kneels down to slowly set up a fire pit. His hips ache fiercely, and his pups move inside his womb, restless in the face of his own anxiety. Before he can even attempt to light the fire, he hears the snap of a twig cracking behind him. He is too heavy with pregnancy to twist around and look, but

he does not need to, for he recognizes the sound of heavy boots among fallen leaves. He rests one hand upon his swollen abdomen and breathes out a shaky sigh without raising his head.

“Good evening, your grace,” says the familiar voice of the knight captain from behind him. “I am glad to see you unharmed after so long away.”

Will does not move.

“His majesty the King has instructed us to bring you home by any means necessary. Will you come quietly? I have no desire to bring harm to you or your pups.”

Will laughs, a harsh, joyless sound. “If that were the case, you would let me go.”

He could fight his way out. He is trained in both sword and hand-to-hand combat, and is no easy target. Or he was, months ago, before he had chosen to allow the pups of a strange alpha to grow within him. Now, he is off-balanced, unwieldy, slow. Now, he has something more to protect. Now, he cannot risk the precious lives he carries within his own body.

He pushes himself to his feet, an awkward, staggering process, and looks around at the circle of knights and foot soldiers, and nods, once. “I’ll come quietly.”

His pursuers have come on horseback, with a cart in tow, and that cart is where Will is led. He clambers up onto it, ignoring the weighted stares heavy upon him. Once settled onto one of the wooden benches, he turns his gaze back out to the trees and hills and late afternoon skies, and keeps a silent vigil as the cart starts to move, slow and rickety, away from everything he had ever hoped to have.

With the aid of the horses and well-worn roadways, the journey between the ocean and the castle is barely a couple weeks, far faster than Will’s cautious off-road path in the other direction. None of his pursuers, now captors, speak to him more than necessary, though they do keep him fed and rested. Royal blood or not, he knows that he will never be more than a bastard to them.

His heart sinks as the castle raises up in the distance. There will be no escaping this time, no one leaping to his aid when his own half-brother is the King holding him fast. The procession of the horses and cart draws significant attention from the city folk once it passes within the walls, and doorways and open windows are filled by alphas, betas, and omegas, all gathered to peer out at Will and his obvious condition. Will keeps his eyes lowered to the swell of his stomach, refusing to meet anyone’s stare, though that does not prevent him from catching snatches of conversation- wild rumors about what he must have done to get away from the castle, mocking suggestions about what low-born alphas he must have spread his legs for out in the wider world, crass suppositions about the identity of his pups’ sire. He tries to sink into the quiet forest of his own mind, but even that respite is thin and wavering in the face of all he has now lost.

And then he is back in the castle proper again, led into the throne room and left to stand alone in the center of the floor. His half-siblings and their mother sit upon their thrones on the dais, with the new King seated on the traditional antler-crowned throne in the middle. It does not suit him, Will thinks. The King might be vindictive, and petty, and prone to pompous

peacockery, but he is no commanding presence, and the throne looms over him, a jarring contradiction, not a symbol of strength. The realization eases something in Will's chest. He stands tall and does not bow.

After a long moment of silence, perhaps unnerved by either Will's defiance or the size of his abdomen, the King sits forward. "So the bounty hunter was correct," he says. "A bastard pup with a belly full of bastard pups. Your mother's influence must be strong indeed." He chuckles, though only a few of the other royals join in.

Will says nothing. He rests a hand upon his swollen stomach, and feels one of his pups kick in response.

When it becomes clear that he is keeping quiet, the King leans back in his throne again. "The rumors about who might have impregnated you are no doubt running rampant, little bastard, but I suppose that truth does not matter. After your mysterious disappearance, we assumed you were dead, yet it seems that you have instead chosen to tarnish the royal name. You bring scandal into our halls, and so the details of your whorish adventuring means as little to me as the lives of your pups."

Will does not flinch, though he cannot avoid the frisson of fear that rolls down his spine. His pups are a new weak point, an easy target, and he is not surprised to hear the implied threat, but the protective instincts of a soon-to-be father flare all the same. He bites back the urge to snap and growl, instead focusing on the elegant collar of the King's tunic, stiff with embroidery but easy to bypass if he could get close enough. He thinks of the bounty hunter, the gory sack of flesh and bone oozing upon the ground. It would be ever so freeing to do it again.

The King's nostrils flare at the lack of reaction, and the rest of the royals shift on their thrones. "You are still our poor, dear father's son, and it is our duty to take care of you in his place, despite how difficult you make it. Fortunately, we were able to secure some assistance in that matter." His voice grows sickly sweet. "Lord Verger's son, Mason, has offered you a place to stay in his ancestral home, where you can birth and raise your pups. In your condition, a noble marriage is hardly on the table, of course, but I'm sure that poses no problem for you. You clearly have no issue with birthing bastards."

Mason Verger. The name rings through Will's mind. It seems so foolish now, but Will had assumed that the noble houses would be uninterested in him and his pups beyond a new source of gossip. A bastard omega with bastard pups is hardly desirable. But no, of course someone like Mason would want easy access to an unwanted branch of the royal tree. Within the fortress of House Verger, the danger to both Will and his newborn pups would be constant, leaving him anxious, frightened, easy to manipulate, and then...

Well.

But Will's mind catches on another word as well. "A noble marriage has been off the table for months," Will says. His voice is higher than he might like, threaded through with fear, but steady all the same. "I am betrothed to the Stag. You agreed to the proposal."

The King smiles at him, all teeth. “A betrothal to a Northern warlord, proposed out of turn by an uninvited emissary? Yes, I suppose I did agree to that. But those Northerners fled as soon as your disappearance was noticed, and I have heard no word from them or any others from those lands about your nuptials, so I find it highly unlikely that your Stag is going to come collect you now. Even if he did, do you really believe he would want you? A ruined omega, with someone else’s pups suckling at your tits?” He laughs. “He’d walk away in a heartbeat and you know it, little bastard.”

Will scowls. “So you intend to break your word?”

“Of course not,” the King says, his amusement obvious. “If he does come, I will send him straight to the Verger fortress to retrieve you. Whatever welcome they prepare for him will be up to them.”

“Fuck you.” The words burst past Will’s lips. He rests one hand upon his stomach, feeling the way his pups move within him, and wishes he could rush forward and tear out the King’s horrid tongue, and then the dull eyes of the rest of his half-siblings where they sit and watch in silence. “Fuck you all. You know what you are condemning me to, what you are doing to us. I won’t forget it.” He glares at them, staring at each awful face until they look away first. “Whatever happens to me, I will never forget it.”

He turns and strides out of the throne room, back straight, and does not look back even when he hears the King’s raised voice demanding his respect. The guards make no move to stop him, though he hears their boots fall into step several feet behind. He knows better than to try and leave the castle. Instead, he marches towards his old rooms, and fights to maintain his strong facade, and not give in to the mounting panic burning through his veins right there in the hallway.

His rooms, it seems, are still his own, or at least show no sign of any new inhabitants, though all trace of his personality have been stripped from them. The nest has only two blankets, thin and rough, and one lumpy pillow. The mirror is streaked, the desk is empty, and the stool before it has a visible tilt. The soft resting chaise he had kept by the window is gone, replaced by a wooden bench. He does not need to open the wardrobe to know that it, too, will be barren.

None of that matters. He closes the door behind himself, blocking out the guards, and pretends that he cannot hear the way they stop and wait. He thinks, for one frantic moment, about throwing himself out the window, ending everything right now, then draws in a deep breath and lets it out again. He curls his hands into fists, tight enough to cut into his palms, and then relaxes. He envisions the forest, peaceful and still.

Then one of his pups kicks, and his shoulders slump, and his breath hitches, and he allows himself to climb into the uncomfortable nest and finally, finally release the tears that he has kept locked away for weeks. He mourns his freedom, and his future, and everything he had ever hoped to have, letting all his pain wash out through quiet sobs into the pillow, until his consciousness washes out with it and he falls into restless slumber.

The next few days pass in a haze of despair. There is no point in planning another escape, not as he is now, so swollen with pregnancy that even getting out of his nest in the mornings is a

struggle. He cannot scale walls or move swiftly, sneak through the shadows or whisper secrets into unsuspecting ears. And once his pups are born, he will be weak, hurting, able to do little but care for them and heal, so potential escape holds no value there, either. He is truly trapped.

And his pups must sense his resignation, for they are restless, moving and pushing and making his hips and abdomen ache to the point of tears. Their due date is fast approaching, according to both the midwife and the castle physician who come to examine him. Perhaps within the next week or two. That only leads him deeper into his spiraling depression. He does not want to give birth here, in this impersonal, cold nest, and he does not want to give birth among the members of House Verger, where he and his pups will have less chance of survival than the pigs, and he has nowhere else he can go.

He receives a letter from Mason Verger, delivered to him personally by several of his half-siblings with the seal already broken. They wait there in his rooms while he reads it, and it is all he can do not to shudder at the disgusting promises contained within the written words. The one that sticks in his mind is Mason's ending declaration that he will be coming to collect Will personally from the castle. The date scrawled at the bottom of the page sears itself into Will's eyes. Here it is, he thinks. A true death sentence.

Perhaps, if he is very lucky, he will be able to slit Mason's throat before he breathes his last.

His half-siblings do not allow him to wallow in his own impending doom any longer. He is bathed daily in sweet milk and flower petals, his skin smeared in paste that leaves it smooth and soft, fading his callouses and sun-warmth until he is milky pale himself. He fights against the shaving of his beard, but it is hard to fight long and vicious with pups so heavy in his womb, and soon enough his jaw is smooth as well. His nails are filed down short. His curls are combed through with scented oils that make his nose itch. He is forced to keep off his feet for most of the daylight hours, servants seeing to his every need, even when he nearly begs them to leave him be.

These are wedding preparations, he knows. He is being treated like a groom to give away, pink-cheeked and smiling, when in reality he is about to meet his end. But what can he do about it? Nothing, now. Nothing at all. His pups squirm painfully within him, and not even his best attempts to soothe them settles their aching motion.

On the morning of the dreaded day, Will wakes to familiar servants waiting at the edge of his nest. He considers refusing to stand, forcing them to lug him upright, then decides against it. He will face his funeral with all the dignity he can still muster. So he struggles to his feet, supporting his swollen abdomen with his hands, and squares his shoulders, bracing himself for what he knows is coming.

He is dressed in a flowing half-gown, dyed deep burgundy and cut to accentuate the swell of his stomach, and his skin is doused in rich perfume, and his hair is tamed with oils and twined through with small red flowers. His cheeks are brightened with pink powder and his lips are colored crimson. He looks at himself in his streaky mirror and sees a painted whore looking back. His chest burns with hurt and rage and humiliation. Still, he holds his head high as he is marched from his rooms, down the corridors, towards the great hall where his death will meet him.

His half-siblings greet his arrival with their usual mixture of mocking words and silence, and their mother ignores him as is typical. He is made to stand at the edge of the dais, no seat prepared to ease his aching feet and hips, and he feels the royals' stares upon him, watching for any sign of faltering, of weakness. He stands tall and firm and waits.

And waits.

And waits.

Mason Verger does not come.

Finally, when Will is on the verge of giving in to the pain and sitting down upon the steps, dignity be damned, the doors to the great hall swing slowly open. It is not Mason standing there, nor any soldiers dressed in Verger colors, but a handful of royal guards, and a stranger clothed head to toe in red leathers, face covered in a mask shaped like the head of a deer. A Northerner. Will's heart skips a beat, but he forces down the first flutters of hope.

The King sits forward in his throne. "What is going on here?"

One of the guards steps back from the Northerner, bowing low without turning fully away. "My apologies, your majesty, but she insists that she has a gift from her lord that must be delivered at once, and by her hand alone. We have been trying to--"

"The Stag sends his regards," the Northerner says, her voice clear and strong. It is faintly familiar, and Will thinks that she may be the omega who had come uninvited to the feast with the rest of the Stag's convoy, so many months ago now. She pushes past the guards around her with seemingly no effort, ignoring their protests and attempts to grab at her, and removes a bag from the belt at her waist. This she holds out before her.

"This is most unusual," the King says sternly, but underneath it, Will hears the strain of confusion and nerves. "You may inform the Stag that his message is well received, but that this is not an opportune time for him to send an emissary. If he wishes to speak before the court, he must come himself, and with sweeter manners." He makes a sharp gesture towards the guards. "Now, if you would--"

"I was not speaking to you," the Northerner says. She steps forward again, and Will sees that she is not directly approaching the thrones, but instead the edge of the dais, where he himself stands slightly removed. "My lord has heard of your safe return, Prince Will," she says. "He is glad to hear that you are unharmed." She extends the bag towards him. At this distance, the fabric looks dark and patchy, as if recently stained.

Questions bubble up in Will's throat, and yet he holds them and his stubborn hope behind his teeth and reaches, silent, for the bag. It's surprisingly heavy in his hands, and the fabric feels cool and slightly damp against his skin. A faint, sickly sweet, almost metallic scent wafts up from it. The image of the bounty hunter's corpse plays across his eyelids. His mouth waters.

He feels the eyes of his half-siblings burning into him as he unties the cords at the top of the bag, but he does not look up to meet them. He reaches inside the bag without hesitation. His

fingers brush along short, greasy hairs, and his heart rabbits in his chest, and he grasps the unseen object firmly, and tugs it out in one sweeping motion.

From his hand dangles Mason Verger's decapitated head. The clouded eyes are rolled upwards. The blue-lipped mouth gapes open. The swollen tongue lolls out over the mottled chin. The raw, bloodstained flesh of the severed neck droops low.

One of Will's half-siblings gasps, and another cries out in shock. Their mother curses. Someone gags. Metal clangs as the King recoils and hits his crown against the back of his throne. And Will... Will shudders, his thighs clenching as his core softens into molten warmth. Desire licks up the base of his spine. It is a good thing he is already pregnant, he thinks, or else he would no doubt need to prepare for an early heat.

"Thank you," he says to the Northerner, meeting her gaze through the shadowed holes of her mask. "You and your lord both. I have never before received such a wonderful gift."

He cannot see her face, but he hears the smile in her voice as she says, "I will pass your words along, your grace. The Stag will be ever so pleased. Now that you have returned, he hopes to take your hand in marriage, as promised so long ago."

"I- You- This is an outrage," the King chokes out. "Guards-"

"A promise I never made, nor consented to," Will says, firm enough to cut through the King's babbling without raising his voice.

The Northerner inclines her head ever so slightly. "Do you mean to refuse him?"

If this were any other moment, were he in any other situation, Will knows that he would. Yet here, now, he recognizes the potential freedom in the unknown, the only chance at it he will have in a very long time, and perhaps it is foolish, but he grabs for it without flinching. "No," he says, "I do not. Tell the Stag that I will wed him willingly, if he comes to collect me himself." He pauses and rests his freed hand, the one not still holding Mason's head aloft, upon his swollen abdomen. "My pups are due very soon, and I would prefer to birth them in his presence, if he is willing to care for them as his own."

"The Stag was clear that he would meet any demands you might make," the Northerner says. "He is not so far from here. I will convey your message, and he will come as swiftly as he can to bring you back to our lands. Is that acceptable?"

Will opens his mouth to agree, but the King cuts him off, nigh-shouting, "It is not acceptable to me! No matter who your lord be, House Verger are vassals of the crown, and this is an act of aggression against my kingdom. He brings conflict on himself and his people, and for what? The hand of a bastard prince, full of another's pups?" He slams his fist down on the arm of his throne. "You will not be leaving to deliver any sort of message at all. You'll be lucky if you don't hang! Guards!"

The Northerner finally looks away from Will, and he follows her gaze over to the King, who curls in on himself slightly beneath the weight of both their stares. "Whatever you do to me,"

she says, “the Stag will still come for what is his. If you do not wish for conflict, I would suggest not provoking him. It was not I who collected your vassal’s head.”

The King sneers at her with shaking lips. “Do you think I am afraid of some Northern bandit?”

“If you mean to keep me from leaving, you must actually stop me.” The deer mask turns towards Will again. “Do you have any further words for me to pass along to your betrothed, your grace?”

Will examines her for a moment. There are so many questions he could ask, so many demands he could make. And yet, as he watches the way the light catches on her strange red leathers, turning them dark and liquid, he finds that he does not wish to speak a single one. “No,” he says. “Only give him my requests, and my thanks.”

She inclines her head, and turns, and strides away, back towards the doors. The King screams for the guards. Swords are drawn and spears hefted. The Northerner flows from step to crouch, spinning beneath one blade and lashing out with a knife of her own, and one guard falls in a mess of limbs and blood splatter, and then a second, and a third. A smile twists at Will’s lips as the very best of the royal guardsmen are slaughtered one by one. He wonders how well-versed in such violence the Stag himself must be, and again feels that flicker of heat within him.

Within moments, the room is a bloodbath, and the Northerner is gone. The royals sit in silence so thick that even the dulllest blade could sever it. Will does not try. He lifts Mason’s head again, twisting his wrist to make that bloated tongue wiggle from side to side. He feels so much more relaxed now, enough that even the constant ache in his hips and back are easily ignored. No matter how uncertain his future, at the very least Mason Verger will no longer be part of it. The alpha certainly looks better like this, bloodless and rotting and pale, without any of that horrible spirit shining through his slackened skin.

“What are you doing?” the old Queen bites out. Will does not immediately realize that she is speaking to him, for she never has before, and when he looks at her, he sees her face tinged green with horror.

“I should kill you where you stand,” the King growls, and Will looks to him and takes in the sight of that same green tinge, that same tight terror. “You forget your place here. This betrothal is-”

“Do you intend to do something about it?” Will asks. His breath comes softly, and his heart beats steady in his chest. “You heard the Stag’s envoy. You see the proof of his capabilities.” He holds out the head, delighting in the way his half-siblings recoil. “Will you provoke his wrath?”

Silence drags between them all again, long and tense, before the King forces a scoff and slumps back into his throne. His crown slips down his forehead, and Will is struck once more by how unsuited he looks to sit there, like a child playing lord. “If you are so determined to wed some strange warlord, I won’t stand in your way.” He waves a hand, faux-casual, his muscles taut with strain. “But do not think that I will allow for this crime against House

Verger. You will get an hour or two to enjoy your new alpha's company before I send my soldiers out to take his head in turn. I doubt he'll live long enough to see your little bastards born."

If he had heard the words only ten minutes earlier, maybe Will would have been upset. Maybe he would have bristled, or snapped, or felt the hair rise on his nape and his cheeks burn. Now, though, with Mason's head dangling from his hand, with the promise of a future unknown, he finds that his calm does not waver. He stands there, and meets the King's gaze, and smiles, all teeth. "Perhaps," he says. "Or perhaps he will give me yours."

He gives Mason one more look, committing that sallow face to memory, then tosses the head towards the thrones. It bounces across the dais. Smears of clotted blood trail in its wake. One of the royals shrieks and pulls his feet up onto his seat as it rolls by. Finally, it comes to rest before the King. His skin goes even greener, and Will's smile widens at the sight of that pallor, that fear and disgust.

Will says nothing more. He rests a hand upon the swell of his stomach, turns, and walks away. Behind him, he hears the true royals start to curse, both at him and at each other, and high-pitched cries for more guards, for servants to remove the head and the slaughtered bodies throughout the room, for knights to ready the army for the arrival of the Northerners. They sound like hogs, Will thinks, scrounging blindly at slop, unworthy of the power they grasp for so greedily.

As the days pass, he keeps one eye on the horizon, awaiting the appearance of his husband-to-be. His pups settle low within his womb, and he knows, innate and unspoken, that they will be born soon. But the view from his windows, out over the city and the wall and the fields beyond, does not change, and he begins to wonder whether the Stag will arrive in time to meet his request.

Then one morning, he looks out from the window beside his nest, and sees that one of the untilled fields of the nearest farm, soft and green with short grass, is covered in a mass of tents and horses and people. From this distance, he cannot make out their details, but he does not need to see deer masks and red leather to know that this is the camp of the Stag. Will's heart flutters in his chest, half hope, half fear.

The servants tend to him nervously, their attention straying to the encampment beyond the walls. Will does not pay them any mind. He knows exactly what he needs now. He dresses in clean, simple clothes- brown breeches and a cream tunic large enough to hang loosely over his chest and stomach, thick sturdy boots and a rough cloak against the morning chill. He tucks a single sprig of red flowers behind one ear. It is not wedding clothing, no draping half-gown or delicate slippers or shimmering jewelry, and when he sees himself in the mirror, he is pleased by the sight of the omega who stares back.

As he starts down towards the castle's main gate, he brings nothing with him beyond the clothes on his back and several red flowers clutched in one hand. He wishes that he could have carried Mason Verger's head as well, a perfect vase for his rough bouquet, but it has no doubt been taken away for burial by now. No great loss.

In the courtyard, he finds his half-siblings mounted astride the largest of the stable's warhorses, dressed in their most imposing finery, half cloth, half armor. Surrounding them is a full regiment of foot soldiers and several mounted knights. Will would be surprised to see them there if he believed for an instant that they intend to give him a royal send-off. No, this is a show of force, a threatening backdrop to the delivery of an unwanted omega groom. Will thinks it unlikely to give pause to the Northerners camped beyond the walls. Someone like the Stag, who has shown himself willing to slaughter a loyal vassal of a foreign kingdom solely for the sake of courting, is not one who will easily balk at a few lines of soldiers, no matter how well-armed.

Will does not react to any of it, merely steps up into the cart awaiting him, and wishes privately that he could ride a horse of his own. At this stage of his pregnancy, though, that is out of the question. He is not going to delay the proceedings just to argue against better sense.

The armored parade attracts the same amount of attention from the city folk as Will's return had, but this time, they are not whispering crude rumors to each other. This time, they stand huddled close together, casting nervous glances between the warhorses and the city walls. Everything feels breathless, quiet. Afraid. Will takes cruel satisfaction from it, and from the way that now, the city folk are the ones avoiding his eyes.

The procession passes through the front gates, and the city falls away behind them, and the Northern camp looms up across the fields. There are no pathways between the main road and the field where the camp is built, and it is not long before the royals and their armored entourage come to a halt. The King glowers down at Will from astride his massive stallion. "This is where your ride ends," he says. "When we come to collect you again, you and your new husband's head, know that whatever drops of father's blood run through your veins will do nothing to protect you or your bastard pups. You are no sibling of ours, and certainly no prince."

Will climbs down from the cart, head held high, and does not reply. He touches the swell of his abdomen and feels the gentle motion of his pups against his palm. He clutches his rough bouquet, draws in a breath, straightens his spine, and begins to walk. The royals, the knights, the city- he leaves them all behind, and feels their gazes burning into his back, and does not care. His gaze stays forward.

The motion in the camp ahead settles into stillness. Red-clad figures stand motionless between tents, and even the horses barely shift where they are tied. When Will is almost halfway across the field, his hips and feet aching at the exertion, three shadows separate from the rest and move out in front of the camp. All three wear the deer-shaped masks that he recognizes so easily now, but the mask of the figure in the middle has antlers that stretch high and wide and sharp, gleaming dark red in the morning sunlight. The Stag, in the flesh.

But the antlers are not what Will truly notices. No, he sees the three figures, and he is taken by the memory of three Northerners arriving in the great hall. He looks at the Stag, and he knows the breadth of those shoulders, and the narrow line of those hips, and the strength in those hands. He knows that way they feel against his own skin. He wishes he could see the Stag's eyes through the mask, and yet already knows their color.

So when he comes to a stop before the three Northerners, he looks into that dark mask, and says, breathy with exertion but dry with humor, “Liar.”

The Stag steps forward until he is barely a foot from Will. One red-gloved hand reaches up and slowly removes the mask. There- a jaw Will knows, and lips, and cheeks, and ears, and red, red eyes. Inside Will’s womb, his pups wriggle and kick as if they, too, recognize the presence before them.

Hannibal stares at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. “You came.”

“You asked me to,” Will says.

Pale eyebrows raise ever so slightly. “And you would do anything I asked of you?” Hannibal asks.

Will scoffs. “You are the one who came all this way to ask for my hand, and twice now. I hardly think you have much of a pedestal on which to rest your foolish assumptions.”

There, on the edge of Hannibal’s lips, curves a smile. “I suppose you are right once again.”

“A common occurrence, I promise you,” Will says, and allows himself a small smile in return.

His pups choose that moment to shift sharply within him. He winces, pressing his free hand against the ache, squeezing his eyes shut for a second. When he opens them again, he sees Hannibal looking down at his swollen abdomen with an expression he does not know. Something open, almost broken. Will frowns at him, sudden concern flickering in his chest.

Before he can open his mouth, Hannibal speaks again. “You told Chiyoh that you are due soon. Is the sire...?”

The laugh that bursts from Will’s throat startles them both. “They’re yours,” he says. “There has not been anyone else. Hannibal, they’re yours.”

Hannibal’s lips tremble. His shoulders slump beneath the red leathers. He sways even closer to Will’s body. “I had hoped, but I dared not assume.” One gloved hand lifts, draws near Will’s stomach, but does not touch. “May I?”

Will laughs again, and he hears the high-pitched ring of it, the relief, the hope, and he does not care. He takes Hannibal’s hand and presses it over the swell of his abdomen. One of the pups kicks out, sharp enough to sting, but does not matter either, not when he sees the way Hannibal smiles, wide, lips parted, sharp crooked teeth on display. This is the alpha who has given him not one, but two chances at freedom. This is the alpha who has given him a family. This is the alpha who has given him the possibility of a future.

Will doesn’t love him, but looking at him now, at Hannibal, at the Stag, at the sire of his pups, he thinks that perhaps he could learn to, with time.

“The midwife only claims that there is more than one,” he says aloud, his voice shaking slightly, “but I know there are three.”

“Three,” Hannibal breathes. He sinks down to his knees on the grass before Will, and rests his head against Will’s abdomen. “I will give them everything they could ever want. I will give you even more. The world, if only you ask it.”

“I’ve already said yes,” Will says, amused. He places his free hand atop Hannibal’s head and pets at the soft silvering hair.

Hannibal kisses his stomach. Though he can only feel slight pressure through the fabric of his tunic, Will shivers at the display of affection. It is strange to realize that someone wants him and his pups so much. Incredible, but strange.

A groan of metal behind him brings Will’s mind back into focus. He does not look back over his shoulder, only sighs and tugs at Hannibal’s hair. “They mean to kill you,” he says, “for what you did to Mason Verger.” The very mention of Mason’s death brings a smile to his lips, though, and he adds, “Thank you again for my gift.”

With another kiss to his stomach, Hannibal sits back on his heels and meets Will’s eyes. “The idea of you at his side repulsed me, and I found that I had to act. I can be quite possessive of the things I desire.”

“As can I,” Will says. He tugs at Hannibal’s hair again, sharper this time. “You say you would give me anything I want, Stag?”

Something dark flickers within Hannibal’s gaze. “Anything, dear Will.”

Will smiles down at him. “I so loved that first gift. Do you think you could bring me more of the same?” He slides his fingers along the jut of Hannibal’s cheek, the curve of his jaw, the fullness of his lips. “Perhaps even decorated with crowns, this time.”

Hannibal breathes out, the air gusting across Will’s fingertips. “Will...”

Will releases him, and Hannibal rises slowly to his feet. Their eye contact never breaks. “Bring me their heads. Bring me their crowns. Bring me a life where they will never have a chance to try and look for me, for our pups, ever again.”

“A wedding present,” Hannibal murmurs.

“A wedding present,” Will agrees, quiet. He rubs a hand along the swell of his stomach, and adds, louder and more sharply, “And bring it quickly, for if our pups are born without their sire present, your head can roll just as easily as all the others.”

Hannibal grins and leans in to kiss him. Will’s heart stutters at the pressure, his lips having gone so long without that he nearly swoons into it, rocking up onto the balls of his feet and allowing Hannibal to bear the brunt of his weight and keep him steady. His pups wriggle inside him, and it aches, but in the best way possible. The hands on his hips, the weight in his womb, the warmth coiling beneath his skin...

When they pull away, after what feels like an eternity caught in the spaces between their shared breaths, Will runs his thumb over the unmarked skin on the side of Hannibal’s neck. “I

am sorry I can't come with you. I would have liked to see the infamous Stag in action."

"There will be more opportunities," Hannibal says. "I can make you as many as you want." He settles one hand back upon Will's stomach again. "For now, rest here, and allow my people to care for you in my stead. I will return as quickly as I can, with all the gifts I can carry."

Will smiles at him and cups that hand in his own. "I'll be waiting."

One more kiss, long and lingering, and then they are pulling apart, and Hannibal is sliding his stag mask back on, and Will is tucking one of the sprigs of red flowers from his rough bouquet into the satchel at Hannibal's hip. Hannibal gives a command in a language that Will does not yet know, and the camp begins to come to life. One of the other Northerners, masked as well, beckons for Will to come deeper among the maze of tents. He goes easily, without question, but he keeps his eyes on Hannibal for as long as he can manage, and he feels Hannibal's eyes burning into him from the eyeholes of his mask for longer still.

The battle is swift and bloody. The soldiers and knights, well-trained as they might be, crumple like brittle parchment before the Northern force. Will watches from the encampment as fires begin to spread within the walls of the city and smoke rises to darken the skies, and the sounds of distant screaming warms the coldness within his chest. He imagines that the streets must be splattered in the same warm, wet red that still lingers in his memory of the bounty hunter's death at his hands. He cannot wait for Hannibal to return to him, victorious.

And he does not have to wait long. By the end of the second night, the fighting is over, and the darkness is still and silent. At the dawn of that next morning, mere moments after Hannibal steps back inside his tent, severed heads dangling from his belt, Will goes into labor, and he fills the day with his own screams and gasps and curses, and then his pups—three, just as he'd thought—fill it further with their own cries. He breaks several of Hannibal's fingers during the worst of it. But when he holds two of his pups to his chest, and sees the third cradled safe in Hannibal's arms, he knows that this is worth the agony.

Peace does not settle immediately, even with the loss of the entire royal family. Skirmishes break out with regularity between the Northerners and those who choose the winning side, and the loyal vassal lords and steadfast allies of the old royals. The armies grow smaller, and the periods of quiet between battles grow longer, and then smaller and longer still. Will rides out to one of the last proper clashes alongside Hannibal and his warriors, now that the physician has deemed him healed enough, and revels in the feel of a blade in his hand and blood on his skin. The way Hannibal looks at him during the slaughter, the monstrous dark-eyed want in that red gaze, drives Will into sudden early heat. They move together within the soft blankets and furs lining their tent, body to body, refamiliarizing themselves to the heady heights of their mutual pleasure. In the throes of that burning, spiraling, blood-stained arousal, Will almost wishes that the fighting will never end.

But end it does, at least for now.

Five months after the fall of the city and its monarchs, five months after the birth of Will and Hannibal's pups, Will sits upon the royal throne, the dark wooden antler tines curling high above his head. He cradles one of his pups to his chest, where she suckles hungrily at his

nipple, and rests his other hand upon the small swell of his stomach, proof of more new life growing within his womb. He stares out at the silent crowd gathered before the dais. His eyes flit from one face to the next, never lingering, only settling long enough to read the lines of emotion written there. Anticipation. Anxiety. Fear. Beyond those faces, through the arching windows above the throne room doors, he sees the long-rotted heads of his half-siblings and their mother mounted on pikes outside, and his body warms with contentment.

A hand rests upon his shoulder. He glances up at the one person here that he truly wants to see right now. His husband. His alpha. His Stag. Hannibal offers him one of his minuscule, tight-lipped smiles, and Will returns it easily before he turns his attention back out onto the crowd. His crowd.

On his other side stands a priestess of the Northern faith that most of Hannibal's people practice and that Will is working to accept into his own life. In her hands, she holds a crown. The crown that had once sat upon his father's head. The crown that had once sat upon his half-brother's head. The crown that, as the priestess intones ceremonial words in both Will's language and her own, she lifts high, drawing all the eyes in the room, and slowly lowers down onto Will's head.

It fits perfectly.

There, sitting upon his throne, with his alpha waiting at his shoulder and his pup suckling at his chest and his crown weighing at his brow, he smiles.

Will Graham is not a prince. He is a King.

End Notes

I don't have much to say about this, other than that I hope you enjoyed the read! Let me know if so.

And thanks again to the members of the Will Graham's Ass server!

Come talk to me on Tumblr at Arakni666, or on Twitter at white_miserable, if you'd like.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!